Muslims in motion: The liberal side of Islam

by John Dart in the November 15, 2003 issue

Moments before receiving an award at a Muslim dinner last month, Oscar-winning filmmaker Michael Moore turned in his seat to watch, along with nearly 400 other people, some clips from his documentary *Bowling for Columbine* and from his provocative acceptance speech at the 2003 Academy Awards. At the Oscars, Moore had asked fellow nominees in the "nonfiction" film category to join him onstage. Then Moore railed against a "fictitious president" who was launching "a fictitious war" against Iraq. Jeers erupted from the audience and the orchestra tried to drown him out. He shouted, "Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you!" to more angry retorts.

By contrast, at the annual media awards dinner of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) on October 16, Moore's performance prompted cheers and standing applause. Like many national Muslim groups in the U.S., the Los Angeles–based advocacy group opposed the invasion of Iraq. But unlike the large Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), known for its work in Washington, MPAC has carved out a progressive niche among U.S. Muslims by often identifying with liberal social causes and declaring loyalty to both democratic ideals and core Islamic teachings.

Another of this year's MPAC media honorees was actor and liberal social activist Mike Farrell (he played B. J. Hunnicutt on the TV series *M*A*S*H*), who also opposed the war in Iraq.

MPAC pointedly saluted "those who speak their conscience rather than tell the powerful what the powerful want to hear," said Salam al-Marayati, the group's 43-year-old executive director. MPAC calls itself "the progressive voice for American Muslims." The theme for its annual meeting in December is "Progressive Islamic Thought and Human Rights."

Linking “progressive” and “Muslim” may seem oxymoronic to those who regard Muslims primarily as terrorist suspects and religious fanatics. But these progressive Muslims are seeking to redefine what it means to be open-minded yet committed to Islam.

Both MPAC and the authors of the new book *Progressive Muslims on Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oneworld Publications) are ambivalent about the adequacy of the word “progressive” to express their stance, but they say that “moderate” and “liberal” are even more misleading terms. The point, they say, is that integrity and engagement with current issues are the keys to advancing human rights within Islam and elsewhere in the world.

MPAC routinely states that in order to keep its political and financial independence, it “does not accept any funding from foreign governments,” not even donations from individuals abroad.

This stance distances MPAC from the case, for example, of Abdurahman Alamoudi, a leader of the American Muslim Council. Alamoudi was stopped at a London airport in August with $340,000 in his luggage after visiting Libya, and was arrested September 29 by U.S. authorities and charged with funding terrorists. The American Muslim Alliance, a self-defined “mainstream” group that urges Muslims to run for political office, said October 16 that it had rescinded its earlier decision to merge with the AMC “in view of recent developments.”

Nor does MPAC accept money from the U.S. government. It has had cordial but adversarial contacts with federal agencies. On October 20 in Washington, Al-Marayati moderated a panel of Muslims who sought clarity from a Treasury Department official on U.S. guidelines for accepting charitable giving.

MPAC’s comfort with political give-and-take carries over to its many interfaith contacts. The group’s senior adviser, retired cardiologist Maher Hathout, who until recently chaired a national Muslim political coalition, is one of three vice chairs of the liberal Interfaith Alliance in Washington—the other two being Jack Moline, a Conservative rabbi, and Gwynne M. Guibord, ecumenical officer for the gay Metropolitan Community Churches.

“Each of us has the freedom not to adopt every item on the agenda,” Hathout said. “This doesn’t reduce the value of working together on civil liberties and discrimination.”

“The term ‘progressive’ Muslim is far from perfect,” acknowledges Omid Safi of Colgate University in his introduction to the book *Progressive Muslims*, which contains contributions from 15 scholars. The volume, which is independent of MPAC’s network, grew out of post-9/11 discussions and includes six women essayists.

Yet, according to Kecia Ali, a contributor to the volume, the term has “the connotation of moving forward to make progress not only in cases of justice but also dealing with our heritage self-consciously with thorough intellectual honesty.” Ali, a visiting professor at Harvard, joined Safi and fellow book contributor Ebrahim Moosa at a panel on progressive Muslims at the Religion Newswriters Association meeting in September.

Moosa, a journalist-scholar who teaches Islamic studies at Duke, said that in South Africa in 1984 he and other Muslims had to decide where they stood on apartheid—one of many new situations in modern times that call for “a dynamism of intepretation of the Qur’an which has been there from the beginning.”

In other words, Moosa and other progressives say that the Qur’an, which Muslims believe is the revelation given to the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, has spawned various schools of thought as well as different applications.

For Muslims, the extraordinary freedom of choice in America can be seen as a peril to faith or as a God-given opportunity. “I think that as communities we are coming to grips with freedom,” says Shabbir Mansuri, the longtime director of the California-based Council on Islamic Education, which advises state boards of education and countless non-Muslim groups. He cited a sermon on freedom given at a Friday service this year by Muzzamil Siddiqi, imam of a large mosque and former president of the Islamic Society of North America. “I can’t remember that as a Friday topic before—and he addressed it in a very positive way, having to choose right from wrong.”

A common refrain of progressive Muslims is decrying simplistic, often legalistic interpretations of scripture. Certain periods of Islam’s history witnessed rigorous debate, says Safi in *Progressive Muslims*. “How different is this attitude from so many contemporary Muslim pundits who hijack an entire tradition, claiming to be a one-man (and it is almost always a man) spokesperson for all Muslims: ‘Islam states . . .’ [There is] no debate, no discussion, no spectrum of perspectives.”

Aslam Abdullah, editor of the *Minaret* monthly magazine and an MPAC colleague, believes that Islamic scholars in the world can be divided into two camps: a "stationary" group that sees Islam "frozen in its content and form," and a "dynamic" group concerned with human dignity, scientific approaches and redefining Islam in an era of change.

In a September editorial, Abdullah praised the speech of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad at a July global conference of Islamic scholars in Kuala Lumpur. The prime minister "rightly pointed out that the divine message is progressive and universal," the editorial said, and it noted that he "urged Muslim scholars to dispel the myth that Islam is a faith that has no concerns with development and human rights."

By mid-October, however, Prime Minister Mahathir, about to retire, was in the news for a speech at another Islamic conference at which he said "the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them." At the same time, NBC and the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Lieutenant General William Boykin—named undersecretary of defense in June—in speaking to evangelical Christians described Islam's god as "an idol," referred to the U.S. as a "Christian nation" and said that America's enemy is "a spiritual enemy . . . called Satan."

At the MPAC media awards dinner, Farrell cited both cases as inflammatory remarks that "must be rebuked by people of all religions." The actor added: "When we hear this kind of demagoguery that passes for political rhetoric we are reminded that the purpose is demonization, giving people the right to hate." The answer, he said to applause, is "the courage to stand in opposition, joining hands on the basis of love for one another."

President Bush reportedly rebuked the Malaysian prime minister, but U.S. officials initially defended Boykin, emphasizing the general's right to free speech. Boykin apologized and asked for an inspector general to investigate his situation.

MPAC called the initial reactions appalling. "While President Bush rightly condemned extremely offensive, anti-Semitic comments" by the Malaysian prime minister, "he has been silent on equally offensive comments made by a member of his own administration," said Al-Marayati in an October 21 statement. Bush later distanced himself from Boykin's remarks, but Al-Marayati said the Boykin appointment "is shameful and totally irresponsible."